Office of City Auditor

CITY OF SEATTLE
MISDEMEANOR WARRANTS

December 1, 1998

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City of Seattle

Office of City Auditor
Nora Masters, City Auditor

December 1, 1998

The Honorable Paul Schell
Seattle City Councilmembers
City of Seattle
Seattle, Washington 98104-1876

Dear Mayor Schell and City Councilmembers:

Attached is our report regarding the City of Seattle's misdemeanor warrants process. The Executive Summary provides a brief discussion of the report's findings and recommendations. We have incorporated the formal comments received from the Seattle Municipal Court and the Police Department into the report document (please see Appendices 7 and 8).

The Seattle Municipal Court, Law Department, and Police Department were highly cooperative throughout the audit process, and efforts are already underway or planned to improve Seattle's warrants service and to respond to the audit's recommendations. Please note that the report's recommendations and suggestions regarding the City's warrants process will be entered into our audit follow-up system. As part of our follow-up process next year, we will ask the Seattle Municipal Court, Law Department, and Police Department to provide a written status report on the progress they have made in implementing the report's recommendations.

We appreciate the assistance and professionalism of the members of the Seattle Municipal Court, Law Department, and Police Department as well as other executive agency personnel who participated in this review. If you have any questions regarding this report or would like additional information, please call me at 233-1093 or Susan Baugh at 233-1097. To improve our work, we ask our readers to complete and return the evaluation form at the back of this report.

Sincerely,

[signature removed for security reasons]

Susan Cohen
City Auditor
Enclosure

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BACKGROUND

Seattle Municipal Court judges issue misdemeanor warrants authorizing the Seattle Police Department and other law enforcement agencies to arrest individuals who fail to appear for scheduled court appearances, pay assigned fines, or comply with sentencing or probation requirements. Between October 1997 and April 1998, the Seattle Times and Seattle Post-Intelligencer published a series of articles that focused on the Seattle Police Department's handling of misdemeanor warrants. The articles were highly critical of the Department's performance and reported that: more than 40,000 defendants with active warrants were at large and some had committed additional crimes; the active backlog of unserved misdemeanor warrants increased by 25 percent between 1989 and 1997; and that the Police Department's warrant investigation and enforcement activities were inconsistent.

The Office of City Auditor initiated an audit of the Police Department's handling of misdemeanor warrants to determine: how effectively and efficiently the Seattle Police Department is clearing[1] misdemeanor warrants; whether the present number of active warrants ("backlog") is reasonable; what initiatives the Police Department, Seattle Municipal Court and Law Department have implemented or planned to improve the clearance of misdemeanor warrants; and what additional steps are needed to improve the City's effectiveness in clearing misdemeanor warrants.

SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

The audit scope was limited to a review of the misdemeanor warrants function from 1993 to 1997. The methodology included a review of Washington State laws; City of Seattle ordinances; and Seattle Municipal Court , Law Department and Police Department policies, procedures, directives, and guidelines. We also analyzed statistical data generated by the Municipal Court Information System, and interviewed key personnel from the Seattle Municipal Court, Law Department, and Police Department. In addition we surveyed comparable jurisdictions to obtain information on their misdemeanor warrant practices.

GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

The Police Department has consistently achieved a high clearance rate for misdemeanor warrants and the rate compared favorably to the other jurisdictions surveyed. The average annual growth rate of active warrants also declined during the past five years. In addition, the increase in the backlog of active warrants was misleading because the backlog is commonly reduced in other jurisdictions by selectively purging older warrants.

Several improvements could be implemented to enhance the City's warrant service. Specific improvements include: 1) assuring that commissioned officers are available to serve high-priority misdemeanor warrants and transport arrested defendants; 2) enhancing the Municipal Court Information System to better serve the needs of the Police Department's Misdemeanor Warrants Unit; 3) improving internal controls and reporting practices within the Misdemeanor Warrants Unit; and 4) providing increased staff training in the use of computer technology for skip-tracing; that is, attempting to locate defendants by researching various criminal databases.

MAJOR FINDINGS

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[1]A warrant is cleared when a defendant has been arrested, posted bail or bond in the amount specified by the warrant, appeared in the Warrants Unit to schedule a court hearing, or appeared in court to address the warrant with a judge. A warrant remains active until it is cleared.

- The Police Department cleared an average of 95 percent of the warrants issued between 1993 and 1997. The Department cleared more than 80 percent of the warrants issued within one year and 89 percent were cleared within three years. Seattle's clearance rate was higher than the clearance rate in any of the other jurisdictions surveyed. In addition, the average annual growth of active warrants declined by 6.51 percent since the Department assumed responsibility for the Warrants Unit in late 1992.
- Most misdemeanor warrants were issued for lower priority offenses such as driving without a valid license, driving with a suspended license, and small-scale property offenses. Only 20 percent of the active misdemeanor warrants were for high-priority offenses such as driving under the influence, domestic violence, and weapons offenses.
- The backlog of active warrants was misleading because the selective purging of older warrants was a common practice in other Washington State jurisdictions and in six of the eight jurisdictions surveyed during the audit. In addition, approximately 70 percent of the active warrants were purged from the Washington Criminal Information Center database, so Seattle police officers were unable to access these warrants from their mobile display terminals. The Law Department developed a draft policy for selectively purging the City's misdemeanor warrants.
- Commissioned officers were needed to serve high-priority misdemeanor warrants and transport arrested defendants.
- The City's warrant service process could be strengthened by enhancing the Municipal Court Information System to better serve the needs of the Warrants Unit; improving internal controls and reporting practices within the Warrants Unit; and providing appropriate staff training in the use of computer technology for skip-tracing.
- Warrant officers generally skip-traced and referred only warrants with bail amounts over $500 to other Police Department units for service. Roughly 68 percent of the Municipal Court warrants had bail amounts below $500.

MAJOR RECOMMENDATIONS/CONSIDERATIONS

- The Seattle Municipal Court should consider adopting a purging policy and working with the Law Department on the further development of its draft purging policy. The policy would establish criteria for selective purging of older active misdemeanor warrants.
- The Municipal Court Information System Administration Group should develop a program to extract and reload older high-priority warrants electronically to the Washington Criminal Information System, so that police officers can access older active warrants from their mobile display terminals.
- If the City intends to assure the public that laws related to high-priority warrants will be enforced, the Police Department will have to make commissioned officers routinely available to handle high- priority warrants by either dedicating police officers to the Warrants Unit or strengthening intradepartmental cooperation to provide routine field search, arrest, and transport services for high- priority warrants.
- The Seattle Municipal Court Information System Administration Group should develop programs to analyze quickly the rates at which warrants are cleared. The appropriateness of modifying or enhancing the current information system should also be determined to allow the Warrants Unit to perform data functions efficiently until the new Criminal Justice Information System is implemented.
- To improve accountability, the Warrants Unit should develop better measures of performance, enhance its record-keeping practices and other management controls, and consider computer training to increase the effectiveness of its warrant officers.
- The City Council may wish to consider establishing a "zero-tolerance" policy for active misdemeanor warrants. Not aggressively pursuing lower bail warrants may allow defendants who fail to appear before the Court to go free while "sanctioning" only those defendants who appear before the Court.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Chapter 1 presents relevant background information on the City of Seattle's misdemeanor warrants, including an overview of how the misdemeanor warrant process works, and a display of currently active warrants by type of offense. The audit scope and methodology is also described in this chapter.

BACKGROUND

Seattle Municipal Court judges issue misdemeanor warrants authorizing the Seattle Police Department and other law enforcement agencies to arrest individuals who fail to appear for scheduled court appearances, pay assigned fines, or comply with sentencing or probation requirements. Between October 1997 and April 1998, the Seattle Times and Seattle Post-Intelligencer published a series of articles[1] that focused on the Seattle Police Department's handling of misdemeanor warrants.[2] The articles were highly critical of the Department's performance, reporting that:

- more than 40,000 offenders and suspects with active warrants were at large, and some were committing additional crimes;

- the backlog of active misdemeanor warrants increased from 40,000 to 50,000 warrants between 1989 and 1997;

- many offenders and suspects, who were arrested and quickly released on their own recognizance,[3] failed to appear for scheduled court appearances, resulting in the issuance of new misdemeanor warrants;

- the Police Department did not assign police officers to the Misdemeanor Warrants Unit, and the "police" work at the Unit was "astonishingly artificial"; and

- the Police Department restricted warrant officers from serving warrants in the field and arresting offenders.

The media coverage led to a high level of public interest and concern. As a result, the City Auditor initiated an audit of the Seattle Police Department's handling of misdemeanor warrants. The Office of City Auditor performed this audit to determine:

- how effectively and efficiently the Seattle Police Department is clearing[4] misdemeanor warrants;

- whether the present size of the inventory of active warrants ("backlog") is reasonable;

- what initiatives the Police Department, Seattle Municipal Court, and Law Department have implemented or planned to improve the clearance of misdemeanor warrants; and

- what additional steps are needed to improve the City's effectiveness in clearing misdemeanor warrants.

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[1]Seattle Times, October 26, 1997; Seattle Post-Intelligencer, October 26, 1997; Seattle Times, October 27, 1997; Seattle Times, December 13, 1997; and Seattle Times, April 16, 1998.

[2]The City Council transferred responsibility for warrants to the Seattle Police Department at the end of 1992. From 1975 to 1992, the responsibility rested with the Seattle Municipal Court. A series of audits, studies, budget issues, and newspaper articles provided the impetus for returning warrants responsibilities to the Police Department. Appendix 1 provides a summary of the relevant misdemeanor warrants audits and a list of studies and issue papers.

[3]Release from custody on the basis of personal standing and community ties such as families and residences.

[4]A warrant is cleared when a defendant has been arrested, posted bail or bond in the amount specified by the warrant, reported to the Warrants Unit to schedule a court hearing, or appeared in court to address the warrant with a judge. A warrant remains active until it is cleared.

How the Misdemeanor Warrant Process Works

When warrants are issued for misdemeanor offenses,[5] the Seattle Municipal Court transmits the warrants to the Seattle Police Department Misdemeanor Warrants Unit through its computerized Municipal Court Information System. In addition, the Municipal Court uploads the warrants records to the Washington Criminal Information Center database, so the warrants records are readily available to police officers statewide who may screen defendants stopped for another offense such as a traffic infraction or public disturbance.

The Warrants Unit is responsible for handling the warrants that authorize the arrest of defendants. The Warrants Unit sends copies of the warrants to defendants at the addresses provided when the defendants were cited. Depending on the seriousness of the warrants[6] and the time available, the Warrants Unit may also take additional steps to locate defendants to clear warrants. The first of these steps is skip-tracing, which is attempting to locate defendants by using various criminal databases,[7] the Washington State Department of Licensing driver and vehicle databases, and Internet resources. The Warrants Unit also sends a second letter reminding defendants to clear their warrants when defendant addresses are confirmed through skip-tracing. The Warrants Unit only sends the highest priority warrants to other Seattle Police Department units so that police officers may attempt to serve the warrants.

The Warrants Unit may also transmit facsimiles of warrants to law enforcement agencies in other jurisdictions and provide warrants information on the Internet, in the lobbies of police and other City buildings, and on the local Channel 28 television show, **Beyond the Badge**. The Warrants Unit may also schedule court appearances for defendants, and may transport defendants detained in other law enforcement jurisdictions to the King County jail. Appendix 2 provides a flowchart of the entire misdemeanor warrants process.

The Warrants Unit currently has 17 full-time-equivalent positions, including one lieutenant, two supervisors, 11 warrant officers and three administrative staff. No police officers are directly assigned to the Warrants Unit. However, police officers are responsible for serving warrants and arresting defendants in addition to their primary duties such as felony crime response and patrol activities.

Most Warrants Issued for Driving and Small-Scale Property Offenses

As shown in Exhibit 1 below, most misdemeanor warrants were issued for lower priority offenses. Forty-one (41) percent of the currently active warrants were issued for driver's license offenses (30 percent for driving without a valid license and 11 percent for driving with a suspended license), and nearly one quarter were for small-scale property offenses (18 percent for theft and 5 percent for shoplifting). Only 20 percent of the active misdemeanor warrants were issued for high-priority misdemeanor offenses, such as driving under the influence (8 percent), assault (6 percent), domestic violence (5 percent) and weapons offenses (1 percent).

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[5]Misdemeanor crimes are less serious than felony crimes and carry smaller maximum penalties. Misdemeanors carry a maximum penalty of 90 days in jail and/or a $1,000 fine; gross misdemeanors carry a maximum penalty of one year in jail and/or a $5,000 fine. Misdemeanor crimes include driving under the influence, shoplifting (less than $250), or less serious assaults. Felonies carry a penalty of more than one year in jail and/or a more than $5,000 fine. Felony crimes include such crimes as murder, rape, and armed robbery.

[6]The Warrants Unit gives priority to misdemeanor domestic violence, driving under the influence, assault and other high-bail offenses. The factors that constitute high-priority warrants are still under discussion.

[7]The databases of the Washington Criminal Information Center, the National Criminal Information Center, the Washington State Department of Corrections, and the King County Jail are commonly used for skip-tracing defendants.

EXHIBIT 1
MISDEMEANOR WARRANTS BY TYPE OF OFFENSE
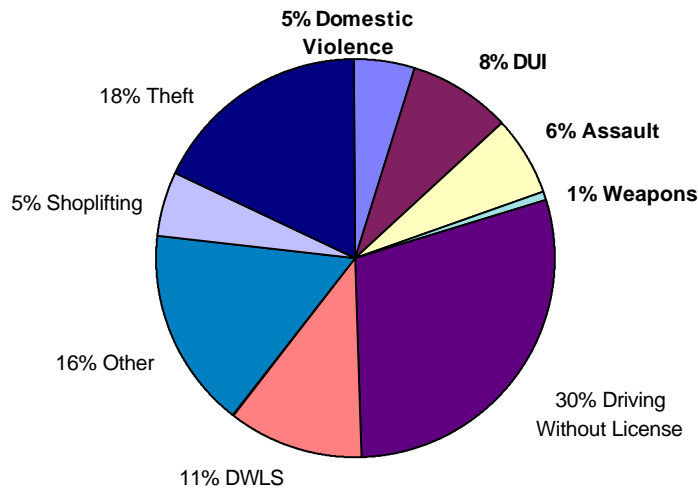
Notes: DUI = Driving Under the Influence; DWLS = Driving With License Suspended. High-priority offenses are shown in bold font.

Source: Municipal Court Information System Statistics, 1997 and 1998.

Recent Decrease in Number of New Misdemeanor Warrants

The Seattle Municipal Court issued 20,700 new warrants in 1997, after issuing an average of 30,000 new warrants per year from 1993 to 1996. The principal factor contributing to the significant decrease in new warrants was the decriminalization of certain driving violations in 1996. For example, the Seattle Municipal Court received only 953 criminal cases related to No Valid Operator's License violations in 1997, which was a 93 percent decrease from the 13,614 cases filed in 1992.

SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

The review of the City's misdemeanor warrants function focused on the period between 1993, when the Police Department assumed responsibility for the Misdemeanor Warrants Unit, and 1997. Audit staff reviewed and analyzed: (1) relevant Washington State laws, City of Seattle ordinances, and the policies, procedures, directives, and guidelines of the Seattle Municipal Court, Law Department and Police Department; and (2) statistical data generated by the Municipal Court Information System. In addition, we interviewed personnel from the Seattle Municipal Court, Law Department, and Police Department.

We also sent a questionnaire to twenty municipal and county agencies to obtain information on misdemeanor warrant services in other jurisdictions. We selected the agencies primarily because they were located in jurisdictions with demographics similar to Seattle's. One agency was selected on the basis of its reputation as a "model" warrants program. Eight (8) of the 20 agencies returned completed questionnaires. A copy of our warrants questionnaire is provided in Appendix 3.

We conducted the audit between February and September 1998 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

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CHAPTER 2: WARRANTS PERFORMANCE

Chapter 2 presents our findings and recommendations on the Seattle Police Department's performance in clearing misdemeanor warrants. Seattle's performance and warrants backlog is also compared to other comparable jurisdictions. In addition, the policies, practices, and initiatives that directly impact Seattle's performance and warrants backlog are reviewed.

CONSISTENTLY HIGH CLEARANCE RATES ACHIEVED

We used two approaches to analyze the Police Department's clearance rates for misdemeanor warrants. The first approach examines the percentage of warrants cleared within 12 months, 24 months, and 36 months from the dates the warrants were issued. This approach measures the Police Department's effectiveness by comparing the total warrants cleared during a particular year by the total warrants issued during the year. This is important because it becomes increasingly difficult to serve older warrants.

The second approach examines the total percentage of warrants cleared within an annual period regardless of the dates the warrants were issued. This approach measures the Police Department's total annual cleared workload (both current and older warrants) against *only* the new warrants issued. This is important because it is the currently accepted method used by the Seattle Police Department and other police agencies to calculate clearance rates. It is also the approach we used during the audit for the comparative review of clearance rates in Seattle and in the other jurisdictions surveyed.

High Percentage of Warrants Cleared Within One Year

Since 1993, the Police Department has cleared a high percentage of warrants within one year of the dates the warrants were issued. Exhibit 2 shows that the Department cleared more than 80 percent of new warrants issued within one year, and the clearance rates increased to 88 percent after three years. In addition, the one-year clearance rate improved from 78 percent for 1993 warrants to 82 percent (as of September 15, 1998) for 1997 warrants. The 1997 clearance rate is expected to increase by December 31, 1998, the end of the full annual cycle.

EXHIBIT 2
WARRANT CLEARANCE PERCENTAGES BY YEAR OF ISSUE

Year Issued	Percentage of Warrants Cleared Within				Still Active
	1 Year	2 Years	3 Years	>3 Years	
1993	78%	84%	86%	89%	11%
1994	81%	86%	88%	89%*	11%
1995	81%	86%	88%*	NA	12%
1996	81%	87%*	NA	NA	13%
1997	82%*	NA	NA	NA	18%

Note: Some of the data in Exhibit 2 is incomplete because the 1998 data was only available for 9 months, and because active warrants for all years will continue to be cleared in the over-3-year category. Additional 1995 warrants will be cleared in the within-3-year category until the end of 1998; additional 1996 warrants will be cleared in the within-2-years category until the end of 1998 and in the within-3-years category until the end of 1999; and additional 1997 warrants will be cleared in the within-1-year category until the end of 1998 and in the within-2-years category until the end of 1999, and in the-within-3 years category until the end of 2000.

Source: Municipal Court Information System, September 15, 1998.

Exhibit 3 below provides a more extensive analysis of warrant clearance rates based upon bail amounts. Generally, bail amounts increase in proportion to the seriousness of the offense, and the bail amounts for higher priority warrants are more than $1,000. As shown below, clearance rates for warrants with higher bail amounts were greater than the clearance rates for lower priority offenses. For example, while 75 percent of 1997 warrants with bail amounts of $500 or less were cleared, 86 percent of the 1997 warrants with bail amounts of $1,000 or more were cleared. This finding is consistent with the Police Department's practice of focusing its resources on higher priority warrants.

EXHIBIT 3
WARRANT CLEARANCE PERCENTAGES BY
BAIL AMOUNT AND YEAR OF ISSUE

Year Issued	Bail Amount	Percent of Warrants Cleared Within				Still Active
		1 Year	2 Years	3 Years	>3 Years	
1993	0-500	71%	78%	81%	88%	12%
	501-1k	83%	87%	89%	90%	10%
	1000+	85%	90%	92%	93%	7%
1994	0-500	73%	80%	83%	84%*	16%
	501-1k	85%	89%	91%	92%*	8%
	1000+	86%	90%	92%	93%*	7%
1995	0-500	73%	79%	82%*		18%
	501-1k	84%	88%	90%*		10%
	1000+	86%	90%	92%*		8%
1996	0-500	74%	81%*			19%
	501-1k	82%	87%*			13%
	1000+	84%	89%*			11%
1997	0-500	75%*				25%
	501-1k	82%*				18%
	1000+	86%*				14%

Source: Municipal Court Information System, September 15, 1998. Please see notes at the bottom of Exhibit 2 that are also relevant to this Exhibit.

Seattle's Clearance Rate Compared Favorably to Other Jurisdictions

Based upon the more currently accepted approach for calculating annual clearance rates, the total number of cleared misdemeanor warrants averaged about 95 percent of the number of new warrants issued from 1993 through 1997. As Exhibit 4 shows, Seattle's annual clearance rate was higher than the clearance rate in any of the other surveyed jurisdictions. In addition, Seattle cleared the second highest number of warrants per full-time-equivalent position assigned to warrants service.

EXHIBIT 4
COMPARATIVE ANNUAL DATA ON CLEARING OF MISDEMEANOR WARRANTS

Jurisdiction	Population (1990 Census)	Total FTEs	Average Warrants Issued	Average Warrants Cleared[a]	Percent Cleared	Warrants Cleared Per FTE	Total Active Warrants	Active Warrants Per Capita
Seattle, WA	516,259	17	28,327	27,000	95%	1,588	50,285	0.10
Buffalo, NY	328,123	32	9,350	8,600	92%	268	10,172	0.03
Denver, CO*	467,610	17	24,297	21,116	87%	1,242	314	0.001
Indianapolis, IN*	731,327	22	17,640	15,955	90%	725	14,000	0.02
Jacksonville, FL*	672,977	17	36,000	10,800	30%	635	147,000	0.22
King County, WA	534,700	12	--[b]	--	--	--	--	--
Mesa, AZ	288,091	10	20,000	15,600	78%	1,560	21,174	0.07
Phoenix, AZ	983,403	7	65,000	47,000	72%	6,714	97,000	0.10
San Diego, CA	1,110,549	NA[c]	58,000	46,000	80%	N/A	131,818	0.12
Average:	733,962	17	32,327	24,008	79%	1,819	48,564	0.08

Note 1: The time span for average warrants issued and cleared is not necessarily the same for all jurisdictions.
Note 2: Asterisks (*) denote jurisdictions with combined city/county governments.
[a]The number of cleared warrants includes purged warrants in Buffalo, Denver, King County, Mesa, Phoenix, and San Diego.
[b]King County returned a completed survey, but was unable to provide an average number of misdemeanor warrants issued and cleared because the County aggregates misdemeanor and felony warrants data.
[c]San Diego did not directly allocate staff to its misdemeanor warrants function.

Source: Seattle Municipal Court Information System, March, April, and July 1998, Misdemeanor Warrant Unit Data, 1998, and Misdemeanor Warrant Survey Data, 1998.

Although Seattle's clearance rate compared favorably to the other jurisdictions surveyed, its total number of active warrants was slightly higher than the average of 48,564 active warrants shown in Exhibit 4 above. Seattle's inventory of roughly 50,000 active warrants as of the end of 1997 suggests that the Seattle Police Department's and Warrants Unit's performances were actually better than average because six of the eight surveyed jurisdictions purged older warrants. Seattle's 50,000 warrants reflects the City's practice of issuing roughly 30,000 warrants annually until 1997 and its policy of retaining all warrants as active until cleared.

Growth of Active Warrants Declined

The growth of active warrants has declined since the Police Department assumed responsibility in late 1992 for the Warrants Unit. From 1990 to 1992, the number of active warrants increased by 6,763 or 18.33 percent. The average annual growth rate was 9.1 percent for the two-year period. Between 1993 and 1997, the number of active warrants increased by 6,632 or 15.19 percent. The average annual increase was 3 percent for the five-year period. Therefore, the average annual growth rate decreased by 6.1 percent during the past five years.

Recommendation: None. The Seattle Police Department's warrant clearance rate is high and the growth of active warrants declined during the past five years.

WARRANTS BACKLOG REFLECTS CITY'S POLICY

The "backlog" of active warrants is partially a consequence of the City's policy to retain older warrants. Indeed, only 22,000 of the 50,000 active warrants at the end of 1997 were issued between 1993 and 1997 (142,000 new warrants were issued during the five-year period). The other 28,000 active warrants were issued prior to the end of 1992, when the Warrants Unit was transferred to the Police Department. Furthermore, 50,000 active warrants is not unreasonable, because it is not possible to clear every warrant issued. Defendants move to other parts of the country and to other countries. Some have no permanent residence. Some use aliases or die.

Retention of Older Warrants Is Not Reasonable

The policy of retaining misdemeanor warrants indefinitely is not reasonable from a practical law enforcement standpoint, because it becomes increasingly difficult to skip-trace defendants and serve warrants as time passes. In addition, cases become increasingly difficult to prosecute because witnesses and victims are harder to locate and memories fade as time passes. The policy of retaining older warrants also undermines morale among police officers who are responsible for serving warrants on cases that will not be successfully prosecuted. Furthermore, more than 68 percent of Seattle's active warrants were associated with low priority misdemeanor offenses, such as driving without a valid driver's license, and police officers are required to give priority to felony crimes, patrol assignments, and other public safety operations.

While the Seattle Municipal Court and Law Department indicated that the older warrants may provide a lawful means to detain certain individuals suspected of other crimes, the purging policies governing the major crime databases limit the usefulness of older City warrants. For example, the Washington Criminal Information Center automatically deletes active misdemeanor warrants three years after the year in which the warrants were issued. As of December 1997, more than 35,000 (70 percent) of the Seattle's 50,000 active warrants had been purged due to age from the Washington Criminal Information Center database, and only a select group of higher priority warrants were manually reentered into the database. Since Seattle police officers are only able to access this database on their mobile data terminals, they generally cannot obtain information on older warrants for defendants screened during traffic stops and other disturbances.

Selectively Purging Older Warrants Is Common Practice

Selectively purging older warrants makes sense from a public policy standpoint because the presence of a growing backlog of active warrants can cause misunderstanding and draw media criticism that lowers public confidence in the criminal justice system. In fact, selectively purging older warrants was a common practice among other Washington State agencies and the jurisdictions surveyed during the audit. In Washington State, 169 district courts that use the Washington State District Court Information System have established expiration dates for their warrants. For example, all King County District Court warrants expire after three years from the date issued and are administratively purged from the Washington State District Court Information System,[8] unless the warrant expiration date is formally extended. The National Criminal Information Center also purges active misdemeanor warrants from its database after 18 months, three years, or five years depending on the crime, and recommends this as a general purging policy for State and local jurisdictions.

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[8]Pursuant to King County District Court LCrRLJ2.2(a).

Six of the eight jurisdictions surveyed during the audit also adopted a policy of purging active older warrants and consider purging an effective method of managing the backlog of active warrants. Exhibit 5 below highlights the criteria used by the six jurisdictions to purge older misdemeanor warrants.

EXHIBIT 5
PURGING CRITERIA ESTABLISHED BY SURVEY RESPONDENTS

Jurisdiction	Purging Criteria
Buffalo	District Attorney's Office reviews and purges misdemeanor warrants every five years.
Denver	Denver purges misdemeanor warrants automatically according to the National Criminal Information Center statute of limitations for misdemeanor crimes: 18 months, three years, or five years, depending on the nature of the offense.
King County	State law establishes misdemeanor warrant expiration dates. Warrant files due to expire are tagged and returned to the court to be assessed for purging.
Mesa	Mesa bases purging criteria on seriousness of crime and uses the National Criminal Information Center statute of limitations for misdemeanor crimes as a guideline, but often maintains warrants for a longer period of time than suggested by the guideline.
Phoenix	Phoenix uses a two-tiered system. Warrants issued on cases that have been through the court system and have a finding are not purged, but all other warrants are purged after five years.
San Diego	San Diego purges misdemeanor warrants after five years.

As shown in Exhibit 5, two-thirds of the survey respondents established criteria to purge active warrants within five years. In addition, several survey respondents considered the seriousness of the offense in developing purging criteria, and four respondents maintained the prerogative to retain certain warrants beyond the established purging dates. Indianapolis and Jacksonville were the two jurisdictions in our survey that did not purge older warrants. Jacksonville had three times as many active warrants as Seattle. Indianapolis, with significantly fewer active warrants than Seattle, recently discontinued purging warrants due to victim restitution and vehicle licensing issues. In addition, Indianapolis considered its current warrants workload "workable" because of increased cooperation among law enforcement agencies.

Policy Drafted for Purging Older Warrants

The Law Department recently developed an internal draft policy for purging older warrants.[9] The draft policy recommends purging warrants after three, six, or 12 years depending on the nature of the crime, the criminal history of the defendant, and other relevant factors. The Law Department also considered expanding the draft purging criteria to be consistent with its misdemeanor sentencing guidelines. That is, warrant expiration dates could be established that are consistent with the length of sentencing for various misdemeanor offenses. The Municipal Court could then assign the expiration dates as new warrants are issued and automatically purge them on the pre-assigned dates. Appendix 4 provides a copy of the Law Department's draft purging criteria and sentencing guidelines for misdemeanor offenses.

The Court purged active warrants automatically based on age until 1989. The Court discontinued these purging efforts based on several factors, including criticism raised in a 1987 Comptroller's Office audit on misdemeanor warrants, issues raised during budget deliberations, and concern that the public would consider misdemeanor warrants less seriously if older active warrants were automatically purged on the

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[9]The Law Department's purging policy, attached to the report as Appendix 4, was an internal discussion draft intended to serve as the basis for further discussions and refinement in consultation with the Seattle Municipal Court and Police Department.

basis of age. The Court was also concerned that the public could view the penalties for less serious civil offenses as harsher than the penalties for criminal offenses if the Court purged warrants but consistently enforced penalties for lesser infractions through collection agencies for a longer period.

Seattle Municipal Court officials will consider instituting a purging policy for older warrants if the policy is based upon meaningful criteria such as the age of the warrant or offense, the nature of the offense, and the offender's criminal history. The Law Department's draft policy meets the these criteria. The Seattle Municipal Court and Law Department are also willing to apply the purging guidelines to newly issued warrants but not to older active warrants, because staff are not available to review the 50,000 active warrants against the purging criteria. This means that the older warrants would not be purged until the 12-year point, because all warrants are purged at the end of 12 years under the draft policy. However, the future growth of the warrants backlog would be reduced because the new, lower priority warrants would be purged in either three or six years, consistent with the expanded purging criteria.

Recommendation: The Seattle Municipal Court should consider adopting a purging policy and working with the Law Department on further development of its draft purging policy. The policy would establish criteria for selective purging of older active misdemeanor warrants. (Please see related recommendation on page 16 regarding re-entry of active warrants into the Washington Criminal Information Center database.)

INITIATIVES PLANNED OR IMPLEMENTED TO IMPROVE WARRANT SERVICE AND REDUCE THE GROWTH OF ACTIVE WARRANTS

The Seattle Municipal Court, Law Department, and Police Department have implemented or planned to implement a number of initiatives in response to public concerns about the growth of active warrants.

Seattle Municipal Court Initiatives

In recent years, the Seattle Municipal Court implemented a series of initiatives to reduce the number of warrants. In particular, the Municipal Court:

- sends unpaid fines for outstanding criminal cases to collection agencies rather than issuing new warrants.

- instituted a 90-day deferral process for individuals with citations for driving with suspended licenses, to provide sufficient time for these individuals to obtain valid licenses.

- cooperated with the Public Defense Bar to educate young drivers on the need to handle tickets responsibly to avoid future charges for driving with a suspended license; and

- established special criteria for Domestic Violence charges on the Bench Warrant Add-On Calendar to promptly schedule court dates for defendants with these high-priority offenses.

Law Department Initiatives

The Law Department has taken steps to reduce the number of cases before the Seattle Municipal Court as an indirect means of reducing the number of warrants issued. In particular, the Law Department:

- implemented a case screening system that reduced the number of misdemeanor cases the Law Department files with the Seattle Municipal Court by an estimated 15 percent;

- began developing a Driving-with-License-Suspended Tow and Impound Law Program, consistent with new Washington State law, to impound the vehicles of offenders with suspended licenses who continue to drive; and

- developed criteria, in conjunction with the Police Department, for a Most Wanted List that identifies the most significant warrants and provides information to allow more systematic field service for these warrants.

In addition, the Law Department cooperated with other city and regional law, safety and justice agencies, to develop strategies to reduce the failure-to-appear rate at court hearings for misdemeanants. The recently issued *Misdemeanant Study: Misdemeanors and Misdemeanor Defendants in King County, Washington* found that three approaches successfully reduced failure-to-appear rates in other jurisdictions and recommended their implementation:

- providing reminders of scheduled hearing dates;[10]

- providing transportation to help defendants get to court; and

- providing better information on previous failures-to-appear occurrences to assist law enforcement and pretrial release screeners with arrest and release decisions.

In support of this process, the City Council recently adopted a motion encouraging the City's implementation of the three approaches for reducing failure-to-appear occurrences by defendants.

Police Department Initiatives

To improve the clearance rate for high-priority warrants, the Police Department has developed "special emphasis" projects that include posting warrants on the Internet, announcing warrants on the Channel 28 program, **Beyond the Badge**, and sending selected warrants to Police Department units to serve warrants. To improve its efficiency and effectiveness, the Department also:

- purchased personal computers for each warrant officer to provide access to the Internet and other criminal justice resources, and

- planned a pilot study on ways to reduce the time required by police officers to transport defendants arrested on misdemeanor warrants to the King County Jail (e.g., "paddy" wagon).

Recommendation. None. The Law Department and Police Department plan to complete the initiatives that have not yet been fully implemented.

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[10]Buffalo (NY) and Phoenix (AZ) call or send postcards to remind defendants of scheduled court hearings.

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CHAPTER 3: WARRANT SERVICE IMPROVEMENTS

Chapter 3 presents our findings and recommendations on additional improvements that could be implemented to improve the City's warrant service. The focus is on specific proactive steps that could be taken to complement or enhance the existing warrants process (described on page 2), which include:

- assuring that police officers are available to serve high-priority misdemeanor warrants and transport arrested defendants;

- enhancing the Municipal Court Information System to better serve the needs of the Warrants Unit;

- improving internal controls and reporting practices within the Warrants Unit;

- reviewing the organization of the Warrants Unit for potential efficiencies; and

- providing appropriate training in the use of computer technology for skip-tracing.

Each of these improvements would enhance either the efficiency or the effectiveness of the City's warrant service.

POLICE OFFICERS NEEDED TO SERVE HIGH-PRIORITY MISDEMEANOR WARRANTS AND TRANSPORT ARRESTED DEFENDANTS

Police officers are not routinely assigned to conduct field search, arrest, and transport activities for defendants with high-priority warrants. Except for limited transport services,[11] Police Department policy prohibits warrant officers from performing these activities.[12] The policy is a reasonable one intended to protect warrant officers, who lack the police academy and field training as well as the intensive physical and psychological testing needed to complete these tasks safely.[13] The Police Department, however, has not made commissioned police officers routinely available to perform these important services. For example, other jurisdictions have released defendants detained on high-priority Seattle Municipal Court misdemeanor warrants because the Police Department was unable to provide police officers or warrant officers to transport the defendants.

The Police Department Property Crimes Section is aware of the problem and had proposed adding four police officers to the Warrants Unit (two officers each on the day and swing shifts to arrest and transport defendants) in its initial 1999 budget request. The Police Department, however, did not include these four officers in its final budget proposal due to budget constraints and other important priorities. These priorities included hiring and training new officers in response to unusually high turnover within the Police Department, adding patrol officer positions to address increasing public safety concerns, and upgrading the Police Department's information technology.

The Police Department also gave less priority to misdemeanor warrants in budgeting and staffing allocation decisions due to previous experiences with warrants service. Police Department officials indicated that police officers had greater effect in other areas, such as responding to felony crimes and countering gang

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[11]Police Department policy allows warrant officers to transport defendants when no felony warrants are involved, the distance is less than 45 miles, and two warrant officers are available. In 1997, warrant officers transported 267 defendants.

[12]The present Police Department policy continues a 1990 policy initiated by the Seattle Municipal Court in response to a Deloitte & Touche report recommendation and the Court's concerns about employee safety.

[13]Two 1998 incidents serve to emphasize the importance of proper law enforcement training in serving warrants. In one, a Kennewick police officer serving a warrant was forced to shoot an armed defendant; in the other, the Seattle Fugitive Action Team had to de-escalate a defendant's hostile behavior while serving a warrant.

activities, than in serving warrants. In 1997, officers temporarily assigned to warrants duties were able to serve only 16 percent of the warrants referred for service. Furthermore, an average of 5.6 hours was required to serve each warrant, yet some of the arrested defendants were quickly released and repeated the cycle of failing to appear for new court dates or complying with release conditions, causing new warrants to be issued for the same defendants.

The Police Department's concern appears to be reasonable. The Warrants Unit's study of 155 domestic violence warrants with bail thresholds in excess of $5,000 indicated that the defendants failed to appear 1,085 times. Thirty-five (35) of the defendants had more than 10 failure-to-appear violations, and 12 of these 35 defendants had more than 20 such violations.

Nevertheless, Seattle Municipal Court and Law Department officials emphasize the need to have professionally trained and skilled staff routinely available to conduct field search, arrest, and transport activities for defendants with high-priority warrants. Prior audits and studies have also recommended that the Police Department dedicate commissioned officers to the Warrants Unit.

Finally, although only three of the eight surveyed jurisdictions assigned police officers to warrants units to serve active misdemeanor warrants, those jurisdictions thought the use of police officers enhanced the effectiveness of their warrants units. However, Denver did not assign police officers to its warrants unit and attributed its reasonably high clearance rate (87 percent) to close working relationships between the warrants unit and other law enforcement personnel and agencies.

Recommendation: The Seattle Municipal Court should consider incorporating the *Misdemeanor Study's* failure-to-appear reduction strategies in its judicial screening criteria for personal recognizance releases. This could help reduce failure-to-appear occurrences for defendants released from a warrants arrest.

Observation: If the City intends to assure the public that laws related to high-priority misdemeanors will be enforced, the Police Department will have to make commissioned officers routinely available to handle field activities associated with high-priority warrants. The Police Department could either dedicate commissioned personnel to the Warrants Unit or strengthen intradepartmental cooperation to provide more available field search, arrest, and transport services for high-priority misdemeanor warrants.

MUNICIPAL COURT INFORMATION SYSTEM IMPROVEMENTS NEEDED

Weaknesses in the Seattle Municipal Court's management information system increase the complexity and time required for skip-tracing and clearing active warrants. In particular:

- some basic warrants information is not readily available;

- purged high-priority misdemeanor warrants cannot be electronically extracted and reloaded to the Washington Criminal Information Center database;

- applications are not interactive with commonly used desk top computer programs;

- complete information on individual defendants is not readily available; and

- consistent data regarding cleared and active warrants is not provided.

The Seattle Municipal Court is aware of many of these system limitations, which are presented in more detail as subfindings below.

1. <u>Some Basic Warrants Information Is Not Readily Available.</u> The Municipal Court Information System provides some basic warrants information. However, when we asked for data on the warrants issued between 1993 and 1997, by time between issuance and clearance (for example, less than one year, more than three years, and still active), the system administrator informed us that this request would require 80 to 100 hours of programming at an approximate cost of $10,000. This analysis, however, is fundamental in evaluating or managing the Warrants Unit because it provides data which reflects the rolling annual warrants cleared from date issued. We modified our request for raw data, which we formatted and analyzed in approximately 12 hours. However, Warrants Unit personnel do not have the computer training and skills to replicate the steps required for this analysis.

2. <u>Purged High-priority Misdemeanor Warrants Cannot Be Electronically Extracted and Reloaded.</u> The Municipal Court Information System does not provide an application for electronically extracting and reloading high-priority active warrants to the Washington Criminal Information Center database. The Washington Criminal Information Center purges all active warrants after three years have passed from the dates the warrants were issued, and this database is the only one that Seattle police officers can access from their mobile display terminals. Because the Seattle Municipal Court, Law Department, and Police Department agree that warrants for such high-priority offenses as domestic violence and driving under the influence should remain accessible to police officers, Warrants Unit and Municipal Court personnel re-enter the purged warrants manually.

3. <u>Applications Are Not Interactive With Commonly Used Desk-Top Computer Programs.</u> The Municipal Court Information System does not provide data in a form that common microcomputer analytical programs can readily use. Consequently, raw data must be downloaded from the information system and uploaded into the desktop software programs for analysis. Warrants Unit personnel, who have limited computer skills, are manually re-entering statistical data into desktop formats to develop routine management and performance reports.

4. <u>Complete Information on Individual Defendants Is Not Readily Available.</u>   Due to system limitations, the Municipal Court Information System requires the Warrants Unit to use time-consuming processes to confirm the location of defendants, update defendant histories, and prepare files for commissioned officers to use in serving warrants. These limitations include a maximum of five lines of remarks per record and lack of flexibility in moving between records for defendants with multiple criminal offenses. Seattle's database contrasts markedly with Denver's specialized statewide computer system that provides easy access to traffic citations, accidents, arrests, and other demographic information on defendants. It also contrasts markedly with the Washington Criminal Information System database which links all active warrants for defendants so that law enforcement personnel can view complete records rather than only the most current or serious warrant. Denver, with the lowest number of active warrants among the eight surveyed jurisdictions, partially attributes its effectiveness to this system. Seattle's database is also more limited than Mesa's database, which can sort defendants by name, age, location, and crime, and create reports of all suspects with warrants residing in a specific grid, beat, area or even apartment complex.

5. <u>Consistent or Reliable Data Regarding the Numbers of Warrants Issued and Cleared Is Not Provided.</u> During the course of this audit, data from multiple Municipal Court Information System reports on the warrants issued and cleared between 1993 and 1997 were inconsistent with one another, and it was not possible to determine the reason for some of these discrepancies. In addition, the Court's System Administration Unit and the Warrants Unit indicated that the pre-1990 data entered into Municipal Court Information System was unreliable.

The Seattle Municipal Court is presently cooperating with other regional law and justice agencies to develop a new management information system. Court officials stated that the new system will have an expanded capability to interact efficiently with other criminal information systems and desktop computer programs, and that the Misdemeanor Warrants Unit's data processing needs will be considered in designing the new system.

Recommendations: The Seattle Municipal Court's Administrator and its Information Systems Administration Group should develop programs to analyze the rates at which warrants issued in various periods of time (months, quarters, years) are cleared within one year, two years, three years and more than three years after issuance. In addition, a program should be developed to extract and upload older high-priority warrants electronically to the Washington Criminal Information System database so that police officers can access these active warrants from their mobile display terminals.

The Seattle Justice Information System oversight group, which includes the Court's Administrator and its Information Systems Administration Group, should also carefully review the data and programming issues identified during the audit to ensure that the new Seattle Justice Information System is adequately designed to meet the data-processing requirements of the Warrants Unit. The appropriateness of modifying or enhancing the present system should also be determined to allow the Warrants Unit to perform its work more efficiently both before and after the new Seattle Justice Information System is available.

PERFORMANCE MEASURES, INTERNAL MANAGEMENT CONTROLS, AND REPORTING PRACTICES COULD BE IMPROVED

To improve its management and accountability, the Warrants Unit needs a more appropriate means of measuring its effectiveness as well as other enhancements in internal management controls and reporting practices. The Warrants Unit currently measures its effectiveness by comparing the total warrants cleared during a particular year against the number of new warrants issued that year. While this type of clearance rate is consistent with clearance rates of other Seattle Police Department units and other police agencies, it is not adequate for evaluating and managing the Police Department's or the Warrants Unit's performance. Its weakness is that the warrants cleared this year come from the population of all active warrants (issued over many years) but are compared *only* with the number of new warrants issued in the particular year. This unmatched comparison runs the risk of drawing erroneous conclusions.

For example, one could conclude that Seattle's warrants performance improved dramatically in 1997 because the ratio of warrants cleared to new warrants issued increased significantly. However, the 1997 clearance rate of 103% does not take into account that both the number of warrants issued and the number of warrants cleared dropped significantly. On the other hand, it also is not beneficial to compare the number of warrants cleared to some measure of total possible workload (for example, a large figure composed of the number of active warrants at the start of the year plus the number of new warrants the Court issues). That kind of measure would erroneously suggest poor performance, which would be detrimental to morale. Therefore, the best measure of the Seattle Police Department's and the Warrants Unit's effectiveness is the proportion of warrants issued and cleared within specific time frames. These ratios would clearly identify whether or not performance is improving or deteriorating. When a computer application is developed to provide this kind of information, it can be easily expanded to provide clearance rates by various types of warrants such as high-priority warrants, specific types of crimes, and warrants with low bail amounts.

The Warrants Unit also needs to improve its internal management controls. During the course of the audit, Office of City Auditor staff worked with Warrants Unit management to identify and improve management controls. Warrants Unit management particularly needed to improve the Unit's record keeping practices to

provide a means to verify and measure total workload and individual performance. For example, warrant officers currently use hash marks (rather than defendant identifiers or telephone numbers) on telephone contact reporting forms to record the number of incoming telephone calls. Consequently, management does not have adequate information to verify the number of telephone contacts each warrant officer reports. In addition, quantitative measures of workload, which generally are reviewed by management as an objective means of individual performance, were also not referenced in performance evaluations.

During the audit, we worked with management to develop report formats that will provide adequate documentation of Warrants Unit workload and performance. We also noted several management control improvements that were the focus of previous audits and studies. Appendix 5 summarizes the management controls and management's responses to our observations, and Appendix 6 contains suggested formats for reporting routine Warrants Unit workload.

Recommendation: To improve accountability, the Warrants Unit should continue to develop objective measures of performance and enhance its record-keeping practices and other management controls.

CAREFUL REVIEW REQUIRED TO IDENTIFY POTENTIAL EFFICIENCIES

The Warrants Unit may be able to increase the efficiency of its operations through more productive use of its supervisors. The management of the Warrants Unit does not believe enough warrant officers are available to handle its present workload. In particular, the Warrants Unit is unable to skip-trace all warrants with a bail amount of $500 or more[14] and transport all defendants to the King County Jail who were detained by other jurisdictions on Seattle Municipal Court warrants. In some cases, warrant officers only skip-traced defendants who had warrants with a bail of $1,000 or more and defendants detained in other jurisdictions were released because Seattle Police Department personnel were not available to provide transportation to the King County Jail.

However, the Warrants Unit currently has a manager (a lieutenant) and two full-time supervisors to manage the work of its 11 warrant officers and three administrative specialists. Most of the work of the warrant officers is routine and repetitive: skip-tracing, making phone contacts, handling face-to-face counter contacts or sending warrant facsimiles to other jurisdictions. In fact, the compensation rate for warrant officers is more consistent with administrative than with professional job responsibilities. Given the routine, repetitive nature of the functions performed by the warrant officers, the Warrants Unit may not need two full-time supervisors and a full-time manager. Assigning the two supervisors a mix of supervisory and direct workload assignments would make additional resources available for important skip-tracing and transport activities. It would also help promote consistency between the different shifts, as staff rotate between day and swing shifts every two months.

Suggestion: To ensure that the Misdemeanor Warrants Unit makes the best use of its two supervisors, the Police Department and the manager of the Misdemeanor Warrants Unit could: 1) review the Unit's span of control, supervisory job duties, and actual supervisory workload; and 2) develop job descriptions for the Unit's two supervisors that allow for an appropriate mix of supervisory and warrant officer activities.

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[14] The Misdemeanor Warrants Unit Policies and Procedures Manual requires skip-tracing for all warrants with a bail amount of $500 or more. However, warrants with a bail amount less than $500 might also be skip-traced due to a defendant's criminal history.

STAFF EFFECTIVENESS COULD BE IMPROVED BY PROVIDING APPROPRIATE COMPUTER TRAINING

Although the Police Department acquired personal computers for the Warrants Unit in September 1997, it has not yet provided training on the use of the computers for skip-tracing defendants. The other surveyed jurisdictions recognized that effective warrants processing required the use of advanced computer resources as well as criminal databases for skip-tracing defendants. Inadequate knowledge of computer resources impedes the thoroughness of skip-tracing and hampers effective warrant service. However, the total Property Crimes Section training budget was only $5,802 ($72.50 per employee). Despite a thorough Warrants Unit orientation program for new staff, more resources are needed for ongoing computer skills and skip-tracing training for warrant officers.[15]

Suggestion: Given its limited training funds, the Warrants Unit may want to follow Denver's practice of assigning warrant officers on each shift to provide ongoing training to new and long-term staff to ensure that they maintain strong skills as new technologies become available. Denver grants eight hours of compensatory time per month to each trainer.

AGGRESSIVE PURSUIT OF ALL WARRANTS INVOLVES SIGNIFICANT TRADEOFFS

The Police Department could clear more warrants if all warrants were aggressively pursued regardless of the bail amounts. The present Warrants Unit policy is not to skip-trace warrants with a bail amount less than $500, because these warrants are generally issued for less serious crimes. In fact, because of present staffing limitations discussed above, warrant officers typically do not have time to skip-trace warrants with a bail threshold less than $1,000. In addition, police officers generally do not arrest defendants who have active warrants with bail amount less than $500, because the Police Department believes the public is often better served by maintaining officers on patrol to respond to more serious crimes than by transporting defendants to jail. The Police Department's own informal survey found that approximately 40 percent of its encounters with defendants who had active warrants did not result in an arrest either due to a low bail threshold or other public safety issues such as officer safety and crowd control.

In contrast, the King County Department of Public Safety recently implemented a "zero tolerance" policy for the King County District Court's warrants. This policy requires King County police officers to aggressively pursue all active warrants regardless of the bail amount. King County police officers cleared 46 percent more warrants during the first two months under this new policy than during the same two-month period of the prior year.

If the Seattle Police Department is expected to maintain its other policing activities at their present levels, a more aggressive stance in serving misdemeanor warrants would require the City Council to provide additional funds to hire more warrant officers and police officers. The only alternative would be for the Department to cut back on its other policing efforts which, the Department believes, have a greater crime-fighting and public-safety priority than serving warrants.

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[15]The Warrants Unit Lieutenant recently informed us that funds were made available for basic Internet training for warrant officers.

POLICY MATTER FOR CONSIDERATION BY THE CITY COUNCIL

In consultation with the Seattle Police Department, the City Council may wish to consider whether establishing a "zero-tolerance" policy for the Seattle Municipal Court's active misdemeanor warrants is appropriate. Aggressive pursuit of defendants with warrants related to less significant charges may not appear to be cost effective given the traditional law enforcement approach of focusing limited warrant officer and police officer resources on more serious crimes. However, recent studies on the relationship between minor and serious crimes suggest that aggressive enforcement of misdemeanor crimes may ultimately be a more cost effective way to reduce serious crime ("Broken Window Theory"). In addition, not aggressively pursuing defendants with warrants may allow defendants who fail to appear before the Court to go free while "sanctioning" only those defendants who appear before the Count.

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APPENDICES

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APPENDIX 1

SUMMARY OF AUDITS AND LIST OF STUDIES AND ISSUE PAPERS
ON THE MISDEMEANOR WARRANT FUNCTION

Relevant Findings And Recommendations From Selected Misdemeanor Warrants Reports

City of Seattle Office of the Comptroller, Audit Division, Seattle Municipal Court Warrant Service Process (1987)

- Warrants canceled in 1985 and 1986 were not cleared in a timely manner.

- Work performed did not include the level of investigative work which is implied in the warrant service function.

- Current staffing levels were too low to adequately deal with workload volume and serve warrants in a timely manner.

City of Seattle Office of Management and Budget, Study of the Seattle Municipal Court's Warrant Office (1988)

- Weekly activity records filled out by Warrant Servers and Administrative Support Assistants are not mandatory, and are sometimes inconsistent and unverified.

- Standardized warrant skip-tracing practices do not exist. Weekly control record reports should be simplified, verified and mandatory.

- Staff performance should be monitored and evaluated on an established, periodic basis. This process would guide future training programs and better ensure a consistently high level of performance.

- Automated record keeping and management improvement should be explored.

Deloitte & Touche, Seattle Municipal Court Caseflow Management and Delay Reduction Study (1990)

- Caseflow management challenges include the need to interrelate efficiently and effectively with several other law and justice agencies.

- Growing workloads are outpacing current staff and other resources (computer support, etc.).

- Serving warrants in the field and clearing warrants when individuals turn themselves in should be handled by law enforcement personnel.

- Transport services should be provided by law enforcement personnel.

- A strategic information technology plan should be prepared for all entities in the system, including the Municipal Court, Law Department, and Police Department.

APPENDIX 1 (Continued)

Listing of Select Audit Studies and Issue Memoranda on the Warrants Function

Seattle Police Department, <u>History of the Warrant Service</u>, 1981.

Municipal Court of Seattle, <u>Parking Citation Collection Study</u>, June, 1981.

Seattle Police Department, <u>Delinquent Municipal Court Warrants</u>, July 7, l981.

City of Seattle Office of the Comptroller Audit Division, <u>Seattle Municipal Court Warrant Service Process</u>, December 23, 1987.

City of Seattle Office of Management and Budget, <u>Study of the Seattle Municipal Court's Warrant Office</u>, September 26, 1988.

Deloitte & Touche, <u>Seattle Municipal Court Caseflow Management and Reduction Study</u>, June 1,1990.

Seattle Police Department, <u>Municipal Court Warrant Officers: Consultant Study</u>, July 30, 1990.

Seattle Police Department, <u>Field Service Warrants</u>, August 1, 1990.

Seattle Police Department, <u>City Council Resolution to Develop Plans for the Transfer of Warrant Field Service and Fugitive Transport to SPD</u>, August 13, 1990.

Seattle Police Department, <u>Municipal Court Warrant Service</u>, November 8, 1990.

<u>Warrant Service Committee Report</u> , 1990.

Seattle Police Department, <u>Cost Estimates for Warrant Office Transfer</u>, March 1, 1991.

Seattle Police Department, <u>Warrant Office Transfer</u>, May 8, 1992.

Lt. Tag Gleason, Seattle Police Department, <u>Review of Warrants Unit</u>, 1995.

Seattle Police Department, <u>Misdemeanor Warrant Issues</u> , May 23, 1996.

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APPENDIX 3

CITY OF SEATTLE MISDEMEANOR WARRANTS
AUDIT SURVEY

Agency: _____   Contact : _____
Position: _____   Address: _____
Telephone: _____   Email: _____

1. Please briefly state your organization's mission and current objectives for the misdemeanor warrants section.

2. Does your organization have performance measures/indicators for the warrants function? Yes _____ No _____.

3. Please describe how the workload measures are established and monitored if you answered yes to Question 2.

4. Please provide the following information on misdemeanor warrants workload:

    a. Average number of misdemeanor warrants assigned annually: _____
    b. Average number of warrants cleared annually: _____
    c. Average number of warrants closed without clearance: _____
    d. Average number of warrants backlogged annually: _____
    e. Total number of backlogged warrants (all years):   _____
    f. Date (year) oldest outstanding warrant was issued: _____

5. Do you think the volume of outstanding warrants is reasonable? Yes____ No____.

6. If your Warrants Unit has experience dealing with a significant misdemeanor warrants backlog, please describe any strategies that were effective in reducing the workload.

7. Does your agency or municipal court have a policy of "purging" older outstanding warrants? Yes ____ No _____. If yes, please describe the guidelines for purging the older warrants.

8. What is the current annual operating budget for the misdemeanor warrants function?

9. Do you think the warrants function is reasonably staffed? Yes _____ No _____.

10. Please provide the following information on staff currently assigned to misdemeanor warrant work:

    a. Total number of management personnel (FTEs):   _____
    b. Total number of professional staff (FTEs):   _____
       --Total commissioned personnel (FTEs):   _____
       --Total non-commissioned personnel (FTEs):   _____
    c. Total number of administrative/support personnel (FTEs):   _____

11. Are professional warrants staff authorized to make arrests? Yes _____ No _____.

12. Please briefly describe the computer resources available for warrant processing?

13. What other management information systems (e.g., NCIC police/court records, etc.) can be accessed directly by misdemeanor warrants personnel?

14. Do you have specialized computer programs/applications that aid in processing and clearing warrants (e.g., extracts all outstanding warrants for suspects)? Yes _____ No _____. If yes, please briefly describe them as well as the staff training provided.

15. Please describe your working relationship with the court system.

16. Please describe your working relationship with the City Attorney's Office.

17. Please describe any program enhancements or progressive steps that substantially improved the efficiency or effectiveness of the warrants functions.

Your comments are welcomed and thank you again for your time and cooperation!!

APPENDIX 4

LAW DEPARTMENT'S RECOMMENDED MISDEMEANOR WARRANTS PURGING CRITERIA AND SENTENCING GUIDELINES

Twelve Year Purge Regardless of Criminal History (Asterisk for Criminal History Based)	Six Year Purge	Three Year Purge
- Domestic violence crime against person - Any domestic violence-related crime regardless of charge - Any driving under influence, physical control or Negligence 1 - Any weapons or firearm-related offense regardless of crime charged/Any offense in which firearm used or displayed - Crimes against person (if articulable aggravating factors per filing and disposition standards) - Stalking - Escape - Dependency - Drug Traffic Loitering - Any crime v. person if: (a) serious bodily or emotional injury or risk of death or serious injury per filing and disposition standards, or (b) High Impact Offender Program - Crimes against person if 6+ points within standards* - Crime against person if in High Impact Offender Program*	- Other crimes against person - Negligent driving - Hit/Run - Reckless driving - Criminal traffic with three or more prior criminal traffic offenses in five years, or major criminal traffic offense - Crimes against person if 6+ points under standards - Any non-traffic crime if articulable aggravating factors (discretionary) - Juvenile-related offenses, except those involving weapons, firearms and dependency (which are twelve years)	- Minor criminal traffic - Crimes not otherwise noted

***Six points may equal two felony convictions, three misdemeanor crimes against person convictions, or six misdemeanor property crime convictions.

Source: Law Department Warrant Purging Memorandum, January 21, 1997.

SENTENCING RECOMMENDATION GUIDELINES

Another alternative proposed by the Law Department was to develop warrants purging guidelines that were consistent with the seriousness of the offense and the defendant's criminal history, as reflected in the "point" system contained in the Criminal Division's filing and disposition standards. Those standards assign point values to a defendant's criminal convictions, depending upon their severity. Less serious misdemeanors, for example, might be assigned a value of only one point, while felony crimes- against-person might be assigned four or more points. The points associated with a defendant's convictions help determine the prosecutor's presumptive sentencing recommendation. Under the Law Department's alternative proposal, the length of time before warrant purging would vary according to the number of points associated with the prosecutor's sentencing recommendation for that crime--the greater the number of points, the longer the period before purging.

WORKSHEET FOR DRIVING WHILE INTOXICATED & PHYSICAL CONTROL

DEFENDANT: _____ **CASE:** _____

DATE OF LAST CRIME: _____ **CURRENT DATE:** _____

I.   Prior Convictions, including companion charges[1]

   ***If defendant has Vehicular Homicide, Vehicular Assault or Felony Hit & Run within past 10 years, recommendation is 1 year.**

   1. Class A felonies.[2]   _____ x 1 point each   = _____
   2. Other non-traffic felonies within past 10 years.   _____ x 1 point each   = _____
   3. DWI, Physical Control, Attempting to Elude a Police Vehicle, Deferred Prosecution or any crime reduced from DWI/Physical Control within past 5 years.   _____ x 2 points each = _____
   4. Gross misdemeanor and misdemeanor crime against person or firearms crime within past 5 years.   _____ x 1 point each = _____
   5. Reckless Driving, Hit & Run (except Unattended or Property), DWLS 1° or Reckless Endangerment if amended from alcohol related traffic crime within past 5 years.   _____ x 1 point each   = _____

                                                          TOTAL _____

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[1] For prior convictions or companion charges which were or are same criminal conduct (same time and place, same victim, same criminal intent), count only most serious.

[2] Class A felonies: Murder 1 and 2, Homicide by Abuse, Assault 1, Assault of a Child 1, Kidnapping 1, Rape 1 and 2, Rape of a Child 1 and 2 (formerly Statutory Rape 1), Child Molestation 1, Arson 1, Burglary 1, Robbery 1, Leading Organized Crime, Use of a Machine Gun in a felony and Vehicular Homicide (after 6-6-96).

DWI/Physical Control Worksheet
Page 2

II.   **Sentencing grid for crimes committed on or after September 1, 1995**

Points	BAC or Refusal	Standard Range
0	< 0.15 or non-refusal no BAC	1 - 10 days / $350 - $750 fine
0	≥ 0.15 or Refusal	2 - 15 days / $500 - $1500 fine
1	< 0.15 or non-refusal no BAC	5 - 45 days / $500 - $1000 fine
1	≥ 0.15 or Refusal	6 - 45 days / $750 - $1500 fine
2	< 0.15 or non-refusal no BAC	30 - 60 days / $1000 - $2000 fine
2	≥ 0.15 or Refusal	45 - 90 days / $1500 - $3000 fine
3	< 0.15 or non-refusal no BAC	60 - 120 days / $1500 - $3000 fine
3	≥ 0.15 or Refusal	75 - 180 days / $1500 - $3000 fine
4 +		120 - 365 days / $3000 - $5000 fine

III.   **Sentencing grid if companion charge is DWLS 1°**

Points	Standard Range
1	90 - 120 days / $1000 - $3000 fine
2	180 - 270 days / $1500 - $3500 fine
3 +	365 days / $3000 - $5000 fine

WORKSHEET FOR CRIMES AGAINST PERSONS & FIREARMS CRIMES

DEFENDANT: _____ **CASE:** _____

DATE OF LAST CRIME: _____ **CURRENT DATE:** _____

I.   Prior Convictions, including companion charges[1]

1. Class A felonies.[2]   _____ x 3 points each = _____
2. Other non-traffic felonies within past 10 years.   _____ x 3 points each = _____
        AND/OR _____ x 2 points each for VUCSA possession
                                                                (RCW 69.50.401(d)) = _____
3. Vehicular Assault, Vehicular Homicide or felony Hit & Run
        within past 10 years.   _____ x 3 points each = _____
4. Non-traffic gross misdemeanors and misdemeanors within past 5 years.
                                                                _____ x 1 point each   = _____
5. DWI, Physical Control, Hit and Run (except Unattended or Property)
        or DWLS 1° within past 5 years.   _____ x 1 point each = _____
6. **Bonus points**
        Prior convictions or companion charge includes crime against person.
                                        ADD _____ x 1 point each = _____

II.   Bonus points if current crime involves firearm

7.   POSSESSION OF FIREARM WITH INTENT TO INTIMIDATE, POSSESSION
        OF FIREARM AT SCHOOL, TAVERN, JAIL, COURT, MENTAL HEALTH
        FACILITY, STADIUM OR CONVENTION CENTER, ALTERING
        IDENTIFYING MARKS OF FIREARM, USING SILENCER, ALLOWING
        BUILDING TO BE USED TO SHOOT AT HUMAN or any CRIME AGAINST
        PERSON involving display of firearm.
                                        ADD 6 points   _____
8.   UNLAWFUL POSSESSION OF PISTOL (RCW 9.41.050).
                                        ADD 2 points   _____
9.   Any other firearms crime.   ADD 4 points   _____

                                        TOTAL _____

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[1] For prior convictions or companion charges which were or are same criminal conduct (same time and place, same victim, same criminal intent), count only most serious.

[2] Class A felonies: Murder 1 and 2, Homicide by Abuse, Assault 1, Assault of a Child 1, Kidnapping 1, Rape 1 and 2, Rape of a Child 1 and 2 (formerly Statutory Rape 1), Child Molestation 1, Arson 1, Burglary 1, Robbery 1, Leading Organized Crime, Use of a Machine Gun in a felony and Vehicular Homicide (after 6-6-96).

Crimes Against Persons and Firearms Crimes Worksheet
Page 2

III.   Sentencing Grid

Points	Standard Range
0	0 - 10 days/ $100 - $500 fine
1	0 - 20 days/ $200 - $750 fine
2	1 - 30 days/ $250 - $1000 fine
3	5 - 45 days/ $300 - $1000 fine (Normally no fine if jail recommendation $\geq$ 45 days)
4	15 - 90 days/ $300 - $1000 fine (Normally no fine if jail recommendation $\geq$ 45 days)
5	30 - 120 days/ $300 - $1000 fine (Normally no fine if jail recommendation $\geq$ 45 days)
6	60 - 180 days
7	90 - 240 days
8	180 - 270 days
9	240 - 365 days
10 +	270 - 365 days

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	Misdemeanant Warrants Unit Internal Control Issues		
	General Standards		
Internal Control Standards	**Associated Risks**	**Observations**	**Corrective Action**
Reasonable Assurance: Internal control systems are to provide reasonable assurance that an organization's objectives will be accomplished.	Management does not have reasonable assurance that objectives will be achieved.	Some documentation could be more comprehensive to monitor performance and to verify that objectives have been accomplished.	Management is currently working toward development and implementation of improved controls and reporting systems.
Supportive Attitude: Managers and employees are to maintain and demonstrate a positive and supportive attitude toward internal controls at all times.	Risk that management and staff will not fully comply with internal control objectives.	Inconsistent supervisory styles and expectations were confusing to employees. Staff do not consistently adhere to some management controls.	Supervisors and staff have been counseled regarding inconsistencies, which have been documented appropriately. Stronger corrective action (e.g., suspension) taken as necessary.
Competent Personnel: Managers and employees are to have personal and professional integrity; are to maintain a level of competence that allows them to accomplish their assigned duties; and are to understand the importance of developing and implementing good internal controls.	Risk that assigned duties and responsibilities will not be properly understood and executed.	Enhanced computer skills training and database knowledge are required to ensure consistent level of performance among warrant officers to meet objectives.	Management lacks training funds to send staff to external training organizations, but is methodically covering topics in staff meetings and considering other internal resources to provide computer skills and database knowledge.
Control Objectives: Internal control objectives are to be identified or developed for each agency activity and are to be logical, applicable, and reasonably complete.	Risk that significant control activities will not be fully understood or accomplished.	Clear procedures have been established along with specific control objectives; however, the control objectives may not be adhered to by some staff.	Management is actively promoting improved compliance with established policies and procedures. (Also see response directly above on management and internal control resources.)
Control Techniques: Internal control techniques are to be effective and efficient in accomplishing their internal control objectives.	Risk that internal controls techniques will be ineffective and inefficient in accomplishing internal control objectives.	Internal control techniques are generally effective and efficient in accomplishing objectives, but training is required to promote compliance.	Management and supervisory personnel are clearly and more frequently communicating importance of controls and compliance expectations.

Misdemeanant Warrants Unit
Internal Control Issues

Specific Standards

Internal Control Standards	Associated Risks	Observations	Corrective Action
Documentation: Internal control systems and significant events are to be clearly documented, and the documentation is readily available for examination.	Management unable to confirm that an event did or did not happen; records not available for future reference.	Some documentation and management reports could be more comprehensive.	Management is currently working toward development and implementation of an improved reporting system. (Please see reporting formats on pages 39 and 40.)
Record of Events: Significant events and transactions are to be promptly recorded and properly classified.	Absence of relevant information for management to control operations and make decisions.	Skip-tracing events are well documented. Other significant (high volume) events could be more thoroughly documented (e.g., telephone inquiries).	Please see comments above.
Execution of Events: Significant events are to be authorized and executed only by personnel acting within the scope of their authority.	Management unable to ensure that only valid transactions and other authorized activities occurred.	No unauthorized events were observed.	No corrective action required.
Separation of Duties: Key duties and responsibilities in authorizing, processing, recording, and reviewing actions should be separated among individuals.	Management unable to ensure that effective checks and balances exist without systematic assignment of duties and responsibilities.	Checks and balances could be improved through more consistent first level supervision and monitoring of routine duties and responsibilities.	Supervisors and staff have been counseled regarding inconsistencies and documented appropriately. Stronger corrective action (e.g., suspension) taken as necessary.
Supervision: Qualified and continuous supervision is to be provided to ensure that internal control objectives are achieved.	Management unable to ensure that staff have the necessary guidance and training to complete assignments; minimizes errors, waste, and wrongful acts; ensures that specific directives are followed.	Management is actively counseling supervisory personnel to improve guidance and monitoring practices necessary for achievement of control objectives.	Management is actively promoting improved compliance with established policies and procedures. (Also see response directly above.)

Misdemeanant Warrants Unit
Internal Control Issues

Specific Standards

Internal Control Standards	Associated Risks	Observations	Corrective Action
<u>Access to and Accountability for Resources</u>: Access to resources and records is to be limited to authorized individuals; accountability for the custody and use of resources is to be assigned and maintained; periodic reconciliation of resources with the recorded accountability is to be made to ensure agreement. The frequency of the reconciliation shall be a function of the vulnerability of the asset.	Restricted access to resources reduces the risk of unauthorized use or loss of public resources, and promotes achievement of management directives.	Public access to facilities and resources is restricted, and no unauthorized activities were observed.	No corrective action necessary.

Source for Internal Control Standards and Associated Risks Sections: United States General Accounting Office, <u>Assessing Internal Controls in Performance Audits</u> and <u>Practical Internal Control Studies Training Institute Instructor Manual</u>.

Source for Observations and Corrective Action Sections: Interviews with Seattle Police Department and Misdemeanor Warrants Unit management.

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APPENDIX 6

WARRANTS OFFICER: _____

DATE: _____

		SEATTLE POLICE DEPARTMENT WARRANTS UNIT SKIP TRACING LOG						
Defendant Name	SMC Warrant Number	NCIC	WACIC	DOC	DOL	KCJ	I-Net	Other (Specify)

APPENDIX 6

WARRANTS OFFICER: _____

DATE: _____

Defendant Name	SMC Warrant Number	Agency/Person Called	Number Called//Faxed	Agency/Person Called	Number Called/Faxed
SEATTLE POLICE DEPARTMENT					
WARRANTS UNIT TELEPHONE AND FACSMILE LOG					

Defendant Name	SMC Warrant Number	Agency/Person Called	Number Called//Faxed	Agency/Person Called	Number Called/Faxed

The Municipal Court of Seattle

Helen L. Halpert
Judge

Public Safety Building, Room 1100
Seattle, WA 98104-1852
206-684-8709

November 30, 1998

Ms. Susan Cohen, City Auditor
Room 1100 Municipal Building
600 Fourth Avenue
Seattle, WA 98104

Dear Ms. Cohen:

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the final report of your office's performance audit of the misdemeanor warrant process. I believe the authors, Ms. Susan Baugh and Ms. Erin Volz, have done a good job of describing the warrant process and identifying potential areas for improvement. However, as Presiding Judge of the Municipal Court of Seattle, I am writing to respond to two recommendations made in the final report that relate to the Court.

Your office recommends that "the Seattle Municipal Court should give strong consideration to adopting the Law Department's draft purging policy and implementing selective purging of older active misdemeanor warrants". The Municipal Court judges have been and will continue to be cooperative partners with other branches of the criminal justice system. The judges will certainly consider and discuss with the Law Department and the Seattle Police Department any warrant purging recommendation made by the Law Department. The judges believe that the Law Department has the primary authority for proposing a purging policy. To date, no formal policy has been presented to the bench.

The report also recommends that "The Seattle Municipal Information System Administration Group should develop programs to analyze quickly the rates at which warrants are cleared. The appropriateness of modifying or enhancing the present system should also be determined to allow the Warrant Unit to perform its data functions efficiently until the new Criminal Justice Information System is implemented." The Court believes these recommendations are well-intentioned but are unrealistic given the age, status, priorities and resources of the Municipal Court Information System (MCIS).

MCIS was designed in 1989 and came on line in November 1990, eight years ago. While eight years does not seem like a long time, an eight-year old information management system is an old system. MCIS was intended to be a case management system and performs this function well given its age. The Court recognizes the limitations of MCIS and is working cooperatively with the Law Department and the Seattle Police Department to design an integrated system, which will better meet the needs of all the partners in the criminal justice

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November 30, 1998
Page two

system. Until a new system is available, the Court must aggressively prioritize any MCIS programming changes.

Limited resources, both human and financial, and changing demands for MCIS programming have often forced the Court to change priorities. For example, several changes in state law made during the last legislative session have generated high priority MCIS programming projects, sidetracking projects which the Court would rather pursue. The judges do not consider the modifications recommended in the misdemeanor warrant audit to be critical to the warrant process. The Auditor's Office was able to calculate a clearance rate for warrants without the necessity of MCIS reprogramming and the misdemeanor clearance rate for Seattle already compares very favorably with other jurisdictions, even those with more sophisticated information system support.

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide additional information about the recommendations in the Misdemeanor Warrant report. If you need additional clarification, please feel free to contact me.

Sincerely,

[signature removed for security reasons]

Helen L. Halpert
Presiding Judge

City of Seattle

Paul Schell, Mayor

Seattle Police Department
Norm Stamper, Chief of Police

November 30, 1998

TO: Susan Cohen
           City Auditor

FROM: Norm Stamper   [signature removed for security reasons]
           Chief of Police

SUBJECT: Response to Report on *Misdemeanor Warrants: High Clearance Rate but Still Room for Improvement*

I appreciate the opportunity to comment on the City Auditor's Report, *Misdemeanor Warrants: High Clearance Rate but Still Room for Improvement*. In our view, the report provides an accurate overview of the misdemeanor warrant process and of the politically sensitive issues of clearance rates and warrants backlog. The report also provides recommendations regarding system-wide warrant service improvements that are of interest to our Department. Your staff has done a thorough, conscientious job in this endeavor, and we are in basic agreement with the conclusions of the report.

Chapter One reviews the October 1997 and April 1998 *Seattle Times* and *Post-Intelligencer* articles that led to the audit of the misdemeanor warrant process. The articles were highly critical of our Department's performance. This audit demonstrates however, that an accurate analysis depicts our performance level as high and in fact exceeding comparable jurisdictions and touted model responses. I appreciate that the diligent work done by your staff serves to redeem the reputation of the employees and supervisors of our Warrants Unit. It also validates our Department efforts since again assuming responsibility for the Unit in 1993.

Chapter Two provides a thorough analysis of misdemeanor warrant clearance rates. In particular Exhibit Four compares Seattle with eight other jurisdictions, of which six utilize warrant purging policies. Even with this comparative disadvantage, Seattle ranks number one for clearance rates. Chapter Two also examines warrant backlogs and purging policies, concluding that the current backlog of Seattle's active misdemeanor warrants reflects city policy. Your audit strongly recommends consideration of initiating the selective purging of older warrants. We strongly agree with this recommendation. As your report points out, not only is purging common practice among jurisdictions, but the National Criminal Information Center (NCIC) also purges active misdemeanor warrants from its database after 18 months, three years, or five years depending on the crime, and recommends this as a general purging policy for State and local jurisdictions. In addition, the Washington Criminal Information Center (WCIC) automatically deletes active

Memorandum to Susan Cohen
November 30, 1998
Page 2 of 3

misdemeanor warrants three years after the year of issue. This means that our officers cannot electronically access warrant information older than three years, unless selected warrants have been manually reentered into WCIC. The Law Department's recently developed draft policy for purging older warrants is a good beginning. We support and are eager to participate in further development of this policy.

Chapter Three identifies five areas of potential warrant service improvement, offering suggestions or recommendations on each. In the first area, your report observes that the Police Department could either dedicate commissioned personnel to the Warrants Unit or strengthen intradepartmental cooperation to provide more available field search, arrest and transport services for high priority misdemeanor warrants. Despite our high clearance rates, we agree. Although there are other staffing priorities that currently preclude dedicating commissioned personnel to the Warrants Unit, we are continually endeavoring to strengthen both inter and intradepartmental strategies and cooperation. Internally, the Warrant Unit regularly provides high priority warrant information to Crime Analysis officers and precinct officers at all four precincts, plus to certain detective follow-up units, (e.g., the Domestic Violence Unit and the Vice Unit). Additionally, a new Department form is currently being printed that will provide officers with a notice to leave for scofflaws who are not at home when officers have attempted service. Externally our Department is coordinating with the King County Chiefs Association to improve transportation of warrant suspects between agencies. Our more recent efforts also include enlisting community participation through posting high priority warrants on the Department's Website, announcing them on the Channel 28 program *Beyond the Badge*, and displaying them in the lobby of the Warrants Unit.

The second area identified for warrant service improvement focuses on the Municipal Court Information System (MCIS). We are supportive of any improvements that the Seattle Municipal Court's Administration and Information Systems Administration Group can develop to analyze clearance rates and to electronically extract and upload older high-priority warrants to WCIS. We are also supportive of any efforts by the Seattle Justice Information System oversight group to ensure that the new system addresses the data-processing requirements of the Warrants Unit.

The third, fourth, and fifth areas identified for warrant service improvement suggest that our Department continue to develop improved measures of performance and record-keeping practices in the Warrant Unit, review the role and job descriptions of the Unit's two supervisor positions, and provide for on-going training for both new and long-term staff. Although we do not agree entirely with the specific recommendations made, steps are being taken to address all three areas. Most significantly, we are now in the process of reorganizing the supervisory structure of the Warrant Unit. The current structure employs one manager, two supervisors, and eleven warrant officers. The new structure

Memorandum to Susan Cohen
November 30, 1998
Page 3 of 3

will employ one manager, one supervisor, two senior warrant officers, and ten warrant officers. We believe this organizational change will provide for better workload distribution, more supervisory coverage, increased accountability and continuity, and enhanced internal training.

The last section of the audit discusses the significant tradeoffs that would result if all warrants, regardless of bail amount, were aggressively pursued by the Police Department. Although the concept of "zero-tolerance" is valid and follows the principles suggested in Fixing Broken Windows, it comes at a price. To achieve zero-tolerance, the Seattle Police Department would need to add additional warrant officers, police officers and prisoner vans. Jail costs would be impacted by increased incarceration rates. The alternative of reducing or compromising other police services that have greater urgency is not acceptable. Even if zero-tolerance by the Police Department were affordable, it would be ineffectual without the full support of the Law Department and the Municipal Courts. Since the warrant process is - and will remain - a systemic issue, it is essential that those who are arrested on warrants be held accountable.

Thank you again for the opportunity to review this report and to provide comments.

FAX...WRITE...CALL...DROP BY...
HELP US SERVE THE CITY BETTER

Our mission at the Office of City Auditor is to help assist the City in achieving honest, efficient management and full accountability throughout the City government. We service the public interest by providing the Mayor, the City Council and City managers with accurate information, unbiased analysis, and objective recommendations on how best to use public resources in support of the well-being of the citizens of Seattle.

Your feedback helps us do a better job. If you could please take a few minutes to fill out the following information for us, it will help us assess and improve our work.

* * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * *

Report: **City of Seattle Misdemeanor Warrants**

Please rate the following elements of this report by checking the appropriate box:

	Too Little	**Just Right**	**Too Much**
Background Information			
Details			
Length of Report			
Clarity of Writing			
Potential Impact			

Suggestions for our report format: _____

_____

Suggestions for future studies: _____

_____

Other comments, thoughts, ideas: _____

_____

Name (Optional): _____

Thanks for taking the time to help us.

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Call: Susan Cohen, City Auditor, 233-1093
E-mail: auditor@ci.seattle.wa.us
Drop by and visit: 10th Floor of the Municipal Building
http://www.pan.ci.seattle.wa.us/seattle/audit/hpg.htm